

## ON CULTURAL APPROPRIATION\*

Throughout North America in recent times, a number of strident confrontations have occurred about the phenomenon of “cultural appropriation.” The most important vanguards of this battle have come mainly from spokespersons of the First Nations and from the African or “Black” communities, manning the barricades of struggles to eradicate all manifestations of Eurocentric colonialism. Conservatives would argue that this is just the latest salvo from the proponents of “political correctness” –a cultural four-decades-old guerrilla war attempting a revolution through changes in lexicological and pedagogical paradigms. For the moment, I will forego any verdict as to the success or failure of this revolution in the overthrow of the North-American ruling classes, and will rather attempt to tackle the issue of cultural appropriation from a historical perspective.

I would argue that cultural “appropriation” has been an element of human societal interaction since ancient times. It is what anthropologists and theologians have labeled Syncretism. A good example of cultural syncretism is the assimilation of Judaic and other Semitic religious practices by the Greek and Roman peoples starting a century after the death of Jesus; and, as Christianity spread throughout the world since then, it continued its syncretic assimilated of many Asian, African and Latin-American traditions.

Furthermore, in the Fine Arts, I could offer countless examples of cultural syncretism in the West. For instance, in architecture, we clearly identify the influence of Moorish elements into medieval church buildings. In music, we can hear the adoption of Arabic motifs into Spanish Flamenco –both dance and instrumentation. And, in more recent times, we note the influence of African masks in the early Cubist works of Picasso.

Closer to our North-American space and time, a very good example of the process of cultural appropriation –or syncretism– is to be found in the history of Jazz. Primarily a product of musical styles and techniques imported from West Africa along with the slave trade, it was originally a purely Black creation, culturally-segregated from Anglo-American music for centuries until it was “discovered” and validated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Ragtime, blues and Louisiana jazz elements slowly became popular among whites, blossoming into the so-called Jazz Era of the 1920’s. Increasing numbers of white musicians and composers then assimilated this exciting new music, creating some of the great musical masterpieces of the last century such as Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* and *Porgy and Bess* –to name just two. Along with the whites, many Black singers and musicians rose to global stardom and have become legendary exponents of Jazz. Names such as Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Miles Davis are studied and revered by our contemporaries both Black and white throughout the world.

It could, of course, be argued that African-Americans had to struggle mightily to overcome the racial barriers and esthetic prejudices prevalent in the years prior to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. And this argument is indeed correct. But I don't believe that many intellectuals in the twenties and thirties demanded that all the Jazz Big Bands be composed only of African-Americans, or that white singers like Bing Crosby or musicians like Benny Goodman should be banned from the airwaves because they weren't culturally-appropriate.

What seems to be missing in the present battlegrounds over cultural appropriation is a deeper analysis of socio-economic factors affecting the treatment of ethno-cultural minorities as pertains to the mass culture industries. In our contemporary market-driven societies, opportunities are exploited by artists who have the means and contacts to get their products to market, and they are generally white. A recent confrontation in Montreal between members of the Black communities and the producers of the musical *Slāv* was right to focus on the lack of black performers in the cast, as it highlighted the problem of lack of opportunities for ethno-racial minorities and for black artists in the Quebec culture industry. The same goes for First Nations' artists, writers and musicians who have very few opportunities today to be published, hired or recorded in a Canadian culture industry mainly run by non-native whites.

In the end, it will not be through finger-pointing or blame-games that racism and colonialism is eradicated from North-American societies, but by addressing the economic and political disparities between the 1% who rule and manage the Market, and the 99% who just passively consume and buy whatever comes out of the cultural pipes.

\* Written by Pascual Delgado, July August 7<sup>th</sup> 2018.